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ON

THE FALSIFICATIONS

OF

Ancient Coins.

A PAPER READ BEFORE THE NUMISMATIC AND ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY OF PHILADELPHIA,

APRIL 3, 1879.

BY S. K. HARZFIELD,

(CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMITTEE ON NUMISMATICS.)

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ON THE FALSIFICATIONS OF ANCIENT COINS.

A PAPER READ BEFORE THE NUMISMATIC AND ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY OF PHILADELPHIA,
APRIL 3, 1879.

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Mr. President and Gentlemen :

I have been asked by my friends to read before this Society a paper on Ancient Counterfeits. A press of professional business and my delicate health however have not allowed me to prepare my paper with the necessary care, and I have to ask your kind indulgence, if it is not as elaborate as you had the right to expect, but rather an abstract of the able writings of Eckhel, Pinkerton, Ackerman, Henin, and others on this subject.

The collection and study of ancient coins gives one more pleasure and information than similar labor bestowed on any other series. It enriches our knowledge of ancient languages, manners and customs, ancient history and chronology, geography, architecture and mythology; it shows the progress, rise and decline of the arts among the various nations and in different reigns and periods. Other objects of art have been destroyed by vandalism or ignorance, or by the effects of time; but coins and medals have still remained, surviving the written annals, and telling us in unmistakable language the story of the past.

On many coins of antiquity, but especially on those of ancient Greece and Rome we are able to trace their deities—represented as possessing the highest perfection of manly strength or womanly beauty: on others we read the records of their sacrifices and worship, their solemn games and plays,

their wars, conquests and triumphs, their magistrates and offices, their colonies, their temples and public buildings. Here are preserved the portraits of great men and emperors, with the story of their deeds, telling us better than books who and what these old Caesars were. And while books would have been imperfect, because influenced in one way or another by the sympathies or prejudices of their authors, and as private utterances of private individuals would be of doubtful authority, coins are official issues and documents, while the medal

“ faithful to its charge of fame
Through climes and ages bears each form and name,
In one short view subjected to our eye
Gods, Emperors, Heroes, Sages, Beauties, lie.”

The collecting of ancient coins, therefore, coins of historical value, must not be considered a “hobby,” but rather as a serious study. It is so regarded in Europe; and in this country — I shall be pardoned if I say in some degree through my efforts — the interest in these medallic records of history is increasing from day to day. It would be more so, if collectors were not afraid of being imposed upon by counterfeits.

It is indeed true that there are plenty of counterfeit antique coins in existence; and the manner in which a recent sale of coins, — catalogued without experience, sold without guarantee, and consisting partly of the meanest forgeries, — was conducted, cannot have been very encouraging to sensible collectors. It is equally true that we have not the facilities for ascertaining the genuineness of ancient coins, which they have in Europe. There the Governments vie with each other in making the finest possible collections of coins, and a numismatist who visits the Museums at London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, etc., will not only find the finest undoubted originals for comparison, but he will also meet scholars connected with these institutions who make the study of Numismatics the aim of their life.

How different is the case when one visits the Cabinet of the United States Mint. Here we simply find a “show,” arranged without knowledge or experience. Even the American Series are not complete, and of the ancient coins a great many are forgeries. The employees in attendance know enough to tell a copper cent from a silver dollar, and to disguise their ignorance in Numismatics they endeavor to excite the interest of an inquiring mind by such show-like announcements as “Here is the widow’s mite, mentioned in the Holy Scriptures,” pointing to a small half-Lepton, worth about fifty cents. This generally satisfies the unwary visitor, and he returns home, pleased for years to come with the idea of having seen the rarest coin of the world.

The question then arises: — How can we protect ourselves against counterfeit ancient coins, and detect forgeries?

This is, I am sorry to say, a question not easily answered ; there are no absolute rules which can be laid down. Practical experience is the principal guide, which must be gained in a great measure by a careful examination of ancient coins ; the comparison of undoubted genuine pieces with doubtful or forged specimens, and the exchange of opinions with experienced numismatists, will by-and-by result in giving us a positive judgment in the matter, so that we "feel" why this coin is all right and that one is not, and are fully aware of the reasons, although we may be unable to teach or explain this positive feeling to others.

Still, there are some general indications possible, which I will try to give. We may distinguish five classes of counterfeits :

First. Antique forgeries of the period, mostly plated.

Second. Retouched, or soldered pieces.

Third. Modern forgeries of skilled masters, like the Paduans.

Fourth. Casts.

Fifth. Imaginary pieces, or rather "Inventions," or "Fabrications."

As to the forgeries of the period, it is to this day undecided whether some of them were not issued by the order, or at least the consent, of the respective Governments, and thus are simply debased authentic issues. These forged coins are generally of base metal, plated with a thin cover of gold or silver, and are therefore called *Nummi subaerati*, or *pelliculati*, and the inner base part *anima nummi*, the soul of the coin. These pieces circulated in the remotest times, and there are collectors who prefer to add them to their collections on account of their incontestable antiquity. It is a strange fact, at any rate, that almost simultaneously with the art of coining, the art of forging should have been invented. There are plated specimens of the coins of Aegina in existence, and of the Darics, — the very earliest coins of the world.

As early as the time of Solon, the edicts of that stern lawgiver affixed the death penalty to forgery, and Herodotus tells us of a report that Polycrates cheated the Lacedemonians by bribing them with coins struck in lead and plated with gold. Ancient forgeries of the mintage of populous cities renowned for their luxury — like Tarentum, Metapontum, and Thurium, the home of the proverbial Sybarites — are abundant ; while those of cities distinguished for their strict manners, like Athens and Thebes, are rarely met with. Few coins of Alexander the Great are found to be plated, while those of Amyntas II. and Pausanias, are nearly all plated, a fraud doubtless sanctioned or caused by these kings.

As to the Romans, Pliny informs us that the soldiers of Anthony mutinied, because he had mixed iron with the denarii. All the denarii of Augustus, with Caius and Lucius on reverse, are plated, and of five denarii of Claudius, we find four plated ones, doubtless proving that this emperor permitted this

debased coinage. Caracalla issued pieces of lead gilt with gold, and copper plated with silver; and during the reign of Antoninus and his successors, the forgeries of public money abounded, so that, as Apuleius shows, it was necessary to submit sums of money to be examined by the *Nummularius*, or changer, to have their genuineness tested.

It is therefore a matter of personal preference, whether we shall admit plated ancient coins of undoubted antiquity into our cabinets. It may in some cases be necessary to complete a series, and in any event such pieces are preferable to illegible, so-called genuine, specimens. But it should never be done when genuine antiques may be easily procured at reasonable prices.

It is quite different with all other classes of counterfeits, all of which are positively mean forgeries of private individuals, made only to impose upon numismatic students and enthusiastic collectors. Thus originated, for instance, the retouched and altered pieces. With graving tools, the portraits, reverses and even inscriptions of genuine pieces have been altered in a surprising manner. From a common Marcus Aurelius was made a rare Pertinax; from a Macrinus a Prescennius.

Soldered medals are those which consist of two halves belonging to different genuine medals, which have been sawed through and then joined with solder. This is sometimes done to make a "rare type," but may be easily detected on careful examination.

As to modern imitations, many of them derive a certain value from their masterly execution, principally those of Benvenuto Cellini, the Paduan forgers, Becker, and similar reputed artists. It was to such pieces that Macaulay alluded when he said, "some of them are fabricated with such exquisite skill that it is the achievement of criticism to distinguish them from originals." Other forgeries are less skillfully done, and they may be easily distinguished by these marks:—

First. The planchets are mostly thinner.

Second. The letters are forked, uniform, and of modern style, principally the M on genuine pieces being always rude, looking like a turned W. (M)

Third. They have either none or an artificial varnish, which is black, greasy and shining, or like a light green coat. This varnish is very tender when touched with a needle, while the genuine antique varnish is hard as the coin itself. If tried with the tongue the modern patina has generally a bitter taste, while the ancient is always tasteless.

Fourth. The sides are generally filed, or artificially smoothed, or hammered.

Fifth. The clefts, if there are any, are wide at the extremity, and going straight in, ending at once in a point, and not with those minute filaments which terminate the genuine.

A letter appeared some time since in the *London Academy*, written by Mr. C. H. Wilson, describing the work of a modern counterfeiter, of Florence, Italy, which seems to rival that of the old masters in this method of deceit, and which is interesting as showing the extent to which it has been carried, no less than the skill employed. He says:—

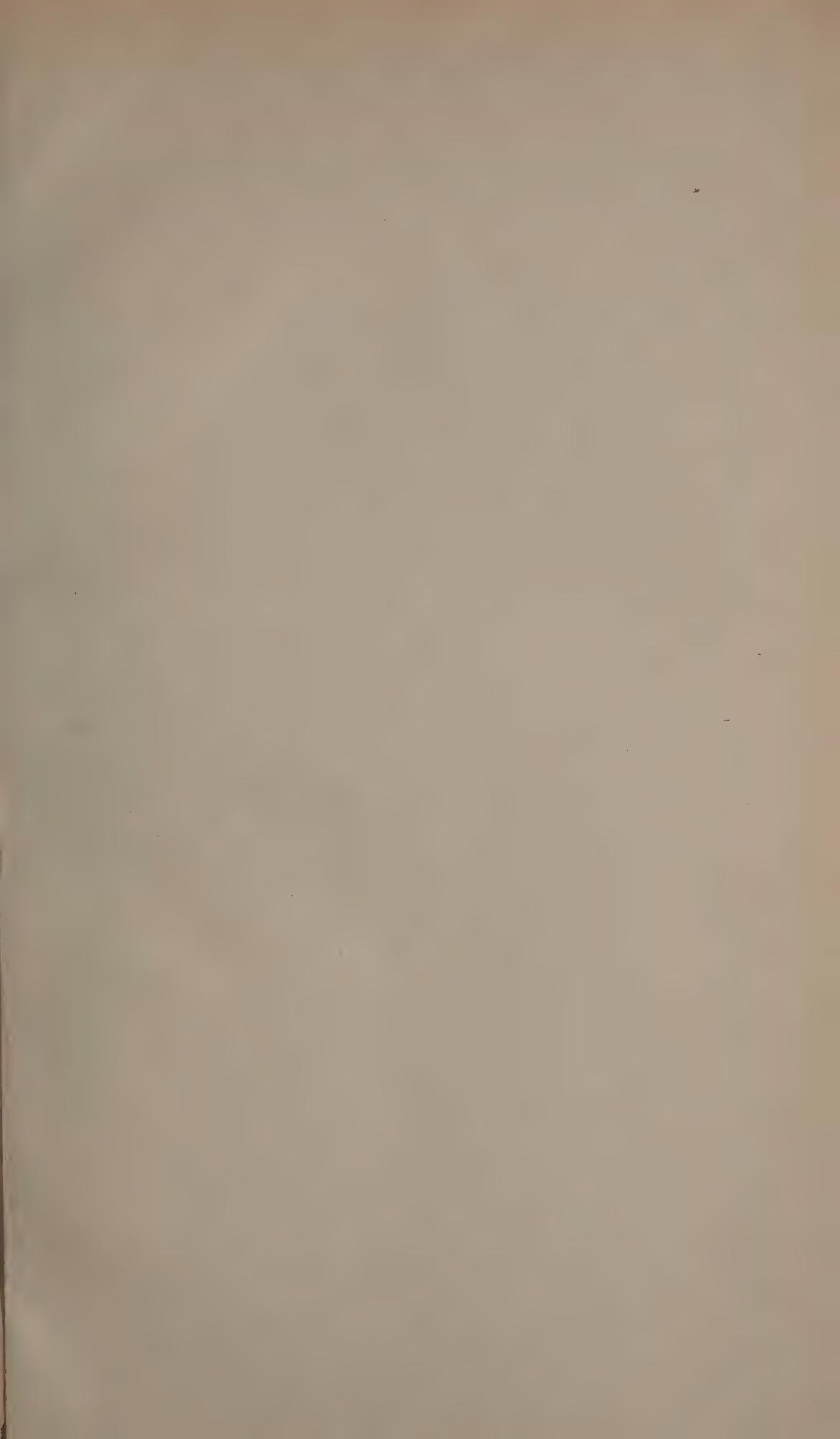
I have just visited a manufactory of bronzes. I bought a couple of knockers in bronze, of excellent design and execution, and I was told that one had been sold as an old Italian work. By the merest accident I heard of the maker. I went to his place and found that he had prepared bronzes of all ages and styles. He is a clever workman, not only casts well, but chases admirably, and then produces any patina. The number of antiques thus fabricated appears to be prodigious. He sells his works for what they are, to dealers, who disperse them all over Italy, and sell them to foreigners by endless ingenious contrivances. They are in curiosity shops; are offered by innocent country-men as just dug up. Strangers are consulted by ingenuous beings who have accidentally acquired an ancient bronze, and are ready to give it away, and so on. Many fall into these traps, and collect figures of Etruscan deities, lamps, candelabra, seals, medals, coins, vases and other objects, all of which are made by one ingenious workman, who thus supports a numerous family, and lives in Florence a by no means luxurious life, for as he deals chiefly with knaves, he is ground down to the lowest price for his wares. He is one of a large class who fabricate antiquities of all kinds to sell to credulous strangers, whom it is as impossible to guard against these deceptions as it is to warn the spoons who are plundered by the card trick. Their vanity leads them to fancy that they have enough knowledge and taste to guard them, and they are taken in, in the most absurd way, little aware that there are Italian artists in this line who can deceive even experienced judges, and that collections everywhere are replete with forgeries. It is lamentable to observe the talent thus wasted, which, rightly employed, would raise art, increase legitimate commerce, and fill collections with fine works of acknowledged merit. But so long as people prefer to think that they make discoveries, get fine things for small payments, and give themselves out as very knowing, so long will the artists bait the hook for them, and make fools of them as they deserve.

Casts are either made from the antique itself, or from the more artistic modern forgeries. They may be discovered by the absence of any sonorous ring from the metal, or by a certain unevenness of the field, and by the marks of the file on the edges. The fact that a coin is a cast, is the best proof of its being a forgery. No ancient coins were produced by casting, even the rudest, earliest coins of the world having been struck from a die.

Imaginary pieces or "Fabrications" form the fifth class of forgeries. They were invented to satisfy the greed of unreasonable collectors for rarities. Thus appeared medals of Priamus and Hannibal; of Julius Caesar with the reverse *VENI VIDI VICI*; of Marius with *Victoria Cimbrica*, and many others. They would not be accepted now by any numismatist, unless he belonged to that class of collectors who, though knowing that there is no genuine large bronze coin of Otho in existence, want a specimen "anyhow."

I have thus tried to give some hints to aid in the discovery of forgeries, but they will be of no service without one has a real and practical knowledge of coins. This can only be acquired by seeing a great number, and comparing the forged with the genuine. A man who buys coins, relying merely on knowledge acquired by a perusal of medallic books, will find himself woefully mistaken, and one enthusiastic numismatist had to pass through such an experience last year, when he described as genuine, and even illustrated in the American Journal of Numismatics, a coin of the Triumvirs, which he found mentioned in some old work, but which is known to every practical numismatist as a forgery. Many old writers, in a similar way, published descriptions of coins as genuine antiques which were evident forgeries. The reason is evident,—they had never examined the pieces, but simply contented themselves with reproducing the statements of earlier authors. Coins ought to be studied where alone they can be studied, in themselves; and if we observe this fundamental rule, we shall not be troubled with the spectre of counterfeits, but shall derive from our collections, in the fullest sense of the word, information and amusement.





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